



STATE POLITICS

At home in Idaho, Ammon Bundy finds support for his family's views on public lands

BY NICOLE BLANCHARD

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Ammon Bundy, of Malheur and Bunkerville fame, is home with his family in Emmett, Idaho. He says he never meant to create a movement - but believes in his family's theories of government land ownership remain. BY [KELSEY GREY](#)



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The first sign that you've arrived at the Bundy family's Emmett home is a poster board affixed to the fence in front of a small apple orchard. Scrawled in Sharpie is the phrase, "Sunlight is the best disinfectant. "

It's a motto of sorts. Ammon Bundy calls himself a "sunlight kind of guy." Before his family's infamous standoffs near Bunkerville, Nevada, and Burns, Oregon, he was living in the dark, he said. Now he's got a new view on life that he's eager to share, he said, and some Idahoans are eager to listen.

It's been nearly three years since Bundy, 43, led a group of protesters to [occupy the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge](#) — first in protest of the government's treatment of a fellow ranching family, then in protest of federal land ownership.

It's been 11 months since his charges for his family's 2014 [confrontation with federal agents on their Nevada ranch](#) over cattle grazing [ended in a mistrial](#). The judge ruled prosecutors committed "gross misconduct" when they withheld evidence from the defense.

Bundy said his priority now is spending time with his wife and six children. But remnants of the standoffs still bubble up each day.

"I'll always get someone that calls me," Bundy said at his home in mid-October, after catching up with a friend calling from federal prison. "Life has never, ever been the same — in a good and a hard way. I think it'll take years and years to kind of dissolve."

And in many ways, he doesn't want it to dissolve. Bundy accepts speaking engagements across the West at [conferences](#) and rallies that touch on [gun rights](#), environmentalism and agriculture — some of them controversial. He often tells the stories of the standoffs and the subsequent trials. And, of course, he advocates the view that has come to be synonymous with the Bundy family: that the federal government has no authority to own or manage land in the states.

That's not to say he's anti-government, Bundy said. He reached out to the Statesman in September to dispute that characterization in an article on [a local Second Amendment rally](#).

"I believe that we have to have government," Bundy said. "I believe that it has to be accountable, and it has to be limited, and it has to be for the purpose of

protecting the individual. Otherwise there's no need for it, and actually becomes more destructive than not having it in the first place."

Bundy espoused some variation of these principles in Bunkerville and Burns. Now he takes the message to Utah, Montana, Idaho. At an April stop in Modesto, California, Bundy called the state's [well-documented water issues](#) "a lie," claimed ice from asteroids replenishes the Earth's water and said environmentalists are out to "entirely destroy the happiness of human life," [the Modesto Bee reported](#).

"My only goal in speaking is to give people a choice," Bundy told the Statesman.

He doesn't feel like he had a choice — not "when you see an army come against your family."

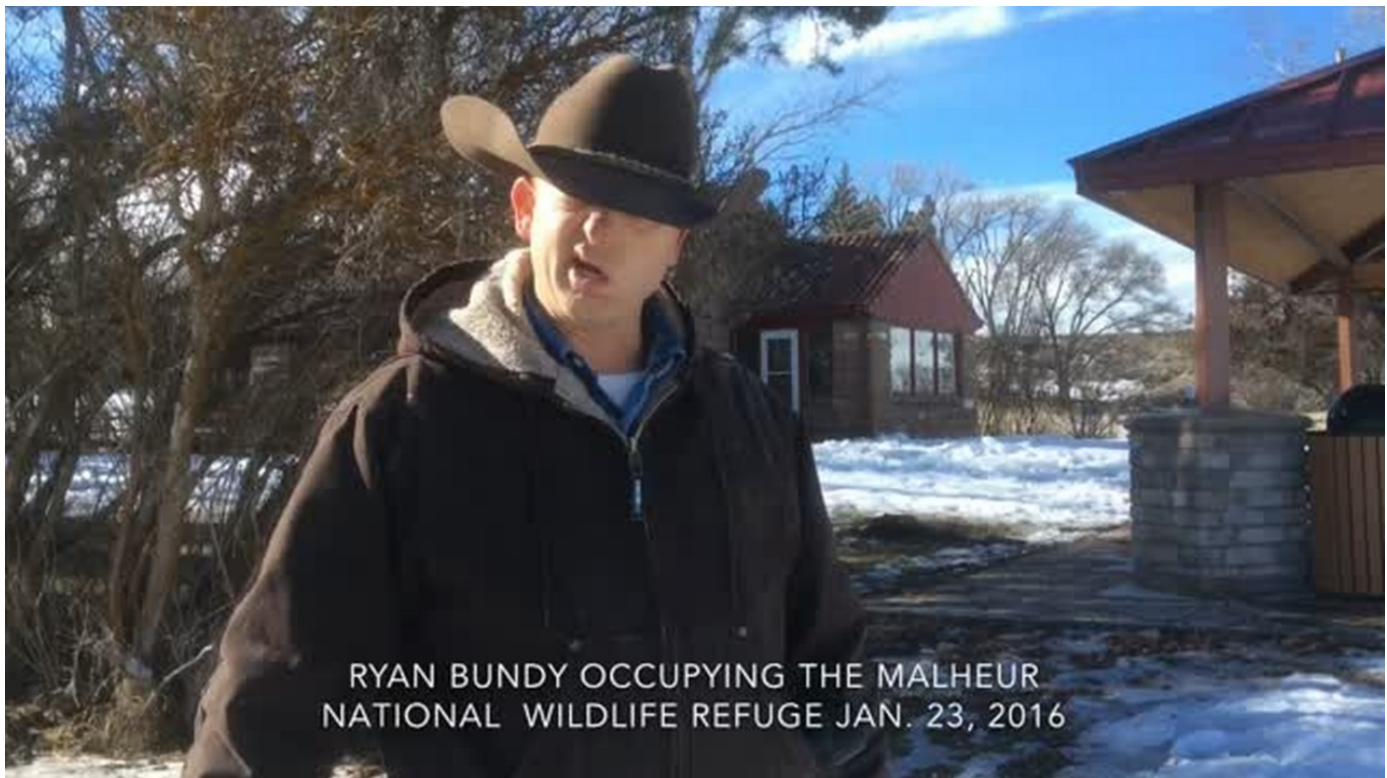
"It pushes you to do something," Bundy said.

And when faced with the choice to stand against the federal government, Bundy said he'd do it again.

"When a circumstance comes up, I believe that you'll know and feel whether it's time to stand or not. There is proof that saying no and meaning no (works). So if it comes to that, I'll keep making that stand. Because that's how I believe things are really changed," he said.

Bundy points to Martin Luther King Jr. and to Rosa Parks, both arrested in the pursuit of civil rights.

"That is the way you change government," Bundy said.



RYAN BUNDY OCCUPYING THE MALHEUR
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE JAN. 23, 2016

Here's the story of how armed men on a mission from God grabbed a national wildlife refuge and sparked a debate about the rule of law and public lands. BY ROCKY BARKER

MAKING A MOVEMENT

The Bundys have become the latest face of a movement that traces back to [the Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1970s](#). But Ammon Bundy said he never meant for that to happen. That's despite [calling others to the Malheur Refuge](#) through the Bundy Ranch website. And, it's despite [counseling other ranchers](#) — like the Hammond family, [whose imprisonment was at the center of the Malheur standoff](#) — to stand their ground when the federal government comes knocking.

“I haven’t wanted to say I’m creating a movement or my family’s creating a movement. It was really just an effort to survive,” Bundy said.

But that’s how many others in Idaho see it — supporters and critics alike.

[Mike Stickler is a Nevada consultant who was convicted of fraud](#) and met Cliven Bundy in prison. Stickler wrote a book on the Bundys’ experience in Bunkerville, where federal agents tried to round up Cliven Bundy’s cattle after he refused to pay fees for grazing them on federal land — to the tune of about \$1 million, [his lawyer estimated last year](#) in an interview with the Las Vegas

Sun.

Market research conducted by Stickler's publisher for "Cliven Bundy: American Patriot" estimated those sympathetic with the family number around 500,000 nationwide. Stickler believes that number is growing.

"There's Bundy fans and there's Bundy haters," Stickler said. "Then there's this vast middle that just doesn't know much about them."

The Bundys' "fans" are fanatic. They're savvy on the details. At an October stop in Marsing on Stickler's book tour, the 30-plus attendees readily jumped into the discussion to talk trials, sentences and standoffs. Some of them witnessed it firsthand.

"I went up to (Malheur) to be peaceful, not to get into a gun battle," said Robert Jones after Stickler's presentation ended. "Now everything has changed."

Jones said all his misconceptions of the protesters operating a "crazy militia" went out the window during his visit. The Bundys, he said, understood the frustrations he'd always had with government entities.

"I would say that you have a movement among the people in the Northwest who feel disenfranchised," said Kevin Miller, a friend of Ammon's and a conservative talk show host on Boise's 580 KIDO.

"Their story resonates with the self-reliance (Idahoans have). Many people have dealt with the (Bureau of Land Management) and want to stand up like Cliven did," Miller said.

Erik Molvar, director of grazing watchdog Western Watersheds Project, said some ranchers are following in Cliven Bundy's footsteps.

"It's not just the Bundys. Trespass grazing is becoming increasingly prevalent across the West, and the federal government is doing precious little to enforce the terms of its agreements with ranchers," Molvar said.

The outcome of the Bundys' trials, he said, "make others feel that there is a lack of enforcement out there, and that's problematic."



Ammon Bundy receives a call from a former fellow inmate while picking Gypsy Lust apples in his orchard in Emmett. Kelsey Grey KGREY@IDAHOSTATESMAN.COM

POLARIZING PRINCIPLES

The Bundy family's core view of federal land ownership has been rejected multiple times in U.S. courts. But it resonates with certain Idahoans already worried about government overreach.

"I think our government has gotten so far away from its purpose in every aspect of our lives," said Thelma Davis, a family friend of the Bundys who now lives in Caldwell. Davis attended Stickler's Marsing book tour date and later spoke to the Statesman via phone.

"Everything we start to do (on our land), the government tells us we can't do it. You own the land, but the government controls it," Davis said.

Marlene Moore, of Marsing, also attended Stickler's talk. In a phone interview, she said she backs the Bundys completely. In an interview that referenced a long-running conspiracy theory involving the U.N., Moore said she worries

private land will be seized by the government and rural Idahoans will be slowly pushed toward urban centers.

“The government, the BLM think they own these lands, and they don’t,” Moore said. “If we allow the government to continue in this manner, it’s going to affect all property.”

Federal skepticism is a bedrock of Idaho politics, but most don’t follow it to the extent the Bundys do.

While in Congress, current Gov. Butch Otter regularly resisted new Idaho wilderness proposals. But as governor, he’s opposed transferring Idaho’s federal lands to state ownership and has recently supported collaborating with the Forest Service and other agencies on lands issues.

“If you are not going to obey the rule of law, then you can’t expect the rule of law to work for you,” [he told the Statesman](#) while Bundy still held the Malheur refuge in January 2016.

Stickler, however, said he believes those who don’t accept the Bundys’ views on the law can still find common ground.

“If you don’t agree with their constitutional stand, that’s fine. But you should be upset about what (law enforcement and prosecutors) did to them,” he said, referencing the misconduct during the Bunkerville trial.

Some Idaho lawmakers were. Last fall, U.S. Rep. Raul Labrador warned Attorney General Jeff Sessions of a possible “miscarriage of justice” [in a letter](#) about the treatment of Ammon Bundy and three other Idahoans connected to Bunkerville. His letter came on the heels of a similar one authored by state Rep. Dorothy Moon, R-Stanley, and signed by dozens of members of the Idaho Legislature.

Those signatures included Rep. Christy Perry, R-Nampa, who lost a bid this spring to replace Labrador in Congress. “I don’t agree or disagree with what they did. But I look at the interactions between government and its people and I see a growing disconnect,” she said in a phone interview Oct. 29.

She called the standoffs “this unwillingness on both sides to come to the table to address the issues” but said the blame “lies squarely in the government’s hands by not being in touch with people, and not being transparent and accountable.”

In a phone interview, Moon recounted the botched prosecution that led to a mistrial on the Bunkerville charges.

“I think people who have researched and followed the court proceedings are sympathetic to the Bundys,” she said. “It’s making criminals out of people who aren’t criminals.”

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers doesn’t see it that way. The 20,000-member organization, which [held its annual rendezvous in Boise](#) in April, strongly rejects the Bundys’ arguments and [helped protest a Montana visit by Cliven Bundy](#) in January.

“I grew up on a ranch,” Ryan Busse, the organization’s national board chairman, said in a press release about the protest. “When someone stole things or grazed cattle on a place they did not have permission, we called them thieves.”

“Some people would see (the mistrial) as a proclamation that the Bundys are right,” Josh Kuntz, regional director for the group’s Idaho chapter, told the Statesman on Wednesday. “But there are legal reasons that it’s declared a mistrial.”

THE ‘RIGHT WAY’ TO DO THINGS

Ammon Bundy knows the standoffs likely lost his family some supporters, that the method wasn’t a perfect means of getting the message out. But he said he sees both incidents as necessary and the outcomes of both trials as victories, confirmation of the innocence he and his fellow protesters claimed all along. Further, he said, he can’t take his complaints about a corrupt government to a courtroom and judge he views as equally corrupt.

“The Bundys may feel that they did (things) civilly. I think that was an escalated conflict. But it’s difficult, and that is a perspective that is certainly subjective,”

Perry said. “I don’t necessarily agree with the way they went about it, but I don’t fault them for their choice.”

She said their frustration is something she hears from her own constituents, a feeling that the government is shirking its responsibility to work for its people. They’re the people who champion the Bundys’ decision to “say no,” as Ammon puts it.

Even other ranchers have criticized the Bundy family’s methods. In 2016, then-leader of the Idaho Cattle Association Wayne Prescott [told KTVB](#) he believed the refuge occupiers had some good points — but their “takeover of buildings at the wildlife refuge is not representative of our ranching community.”

“Eighty percent of the people (who support them) share the view that the Bundys are heroes. The vocal 20 percent believe they should’ve gone through the process (before the standoffs),” KIDO’s Miller said.

Kuntz said supporters themselves are just a small, vocal minority in the West. But he worries about the makeup of the group.

“It’s concerning to see some Idaho legislators support (the Bundys’ stance) when evidence shows people are happy with the current (land management) system,” Kuntz said.

Still, he thinks the standoffs have done more good than harm when it comes to public lands policy.

“Due to the publicity, it helped the public understand what they have. A lot of people may have been taking (public lands) for granted, so this can remind them there are people who would try to strip that away,” Kuntz said.





Ammon Bundy, who led the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, speaks at an Idaho 2nd Amendment Alliance rally in September 2018 in Boise. Katherine Jones
KJONES@IDAHOSTATESMAN.COM

ANOTHER STANDOFF — THIS TIME, OF IDEAS

Ammon Bundy said Kuntz's interpretation is just another of the misunderstandings he's tried to combat since the Bunkerville incident.

"I've had to almost get calloused to people just not understanding, because there hasn't been a whole lot better way (to explain it)," Bundy said. "Either they won't listen, or you just can't get them (that much) information. I think that if intelligent people would look at the situation and put aside their biases for just a little bit, they would see the true danger not only to us and the agricultural community, but also to them."

That's why he thinks education is his way to propel the "non-movement" forward and avoid the what he sees as the true danger to the American people: federal overreach. (His brother Ryan, another main figure in both standoffs, ran for governor of Nevada as his part. He earned about 1.4 percent of the vote.)

In addition to speaking engagements, Ammon Bundy has thought about social media as a tool, pointing to the millions of views on the Bundy Ranch Facebook page and protesters' YouTube accounts during the Malheur occupation. It's one

means of getting word out directly to skeptics, but Molvar isn't sure that will help the Bundys' cause.

"I don't think the Bundys are misunderstood at all. If anything, I think people understand the Bundys all too well," he said.

Even with frustrated Westerners on his side and new avenues through which to share his views, Bundy may find himself in another standoff — an intellectual one, where he and his family refuse to budge on their interpretation of the Constitution and many Americans refuse to consider it as a valid viewpoint.

"Just because I believe I have the right to do something doesn't mean that I do," Kuntz said.

Bundy said he's confident that people can come to understand him as long as he shines a light on his experiences and lets everything be seen.

"I'm fine with what people conclude, but now when their conclusions are made without the proper information. You can't force people to love you," he said.

"You can't force people to even like you."

Nicole Blanchard: 377-6410, [@NMBlanchard](#)



Like his relatives, Ammon Bundy believes the federal government has no authority to own or manage land in the states. But he objects to being called anti-government. "I'm not," said Bundy. "I believe we have to have a government. I believe that it has to be accountable and it has to be limited and it has to be for the purpose of protecting the individual." KELSEY GREY KGREY@IDAHOSTATESMAN.COM

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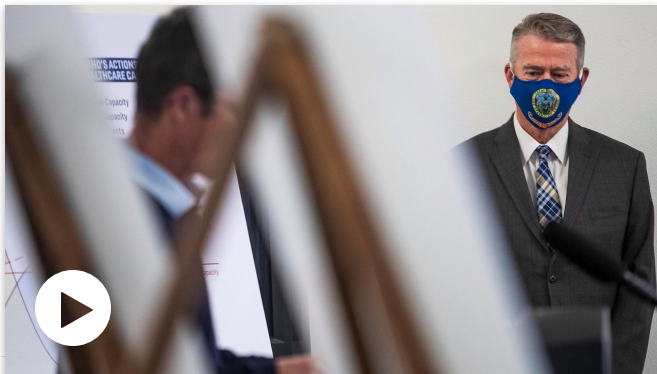
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